

**Opening Remarks of Hon. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, Chair  
Subcommittee on the Middle East and Central Asia  
For hearing: "U.S. Policy in Central Asia: Balancing Priorities (Part II)"  
held on Wednesday, April 25, 2006 at 2:00 p.m. in 2255**

The break-up of the Soviet Union and the tragic events of 9/11 have been the primary forces behind the transformation of U.S. foreign policy toward Central Asia.

The first event brought about the opportunity for the U.S. to help governments in Central Asia build free, tolerant, democratic and sovereign states.

The latter event, with the necessity for the U.S. to counter terrorism in Afghanistan and throughout the world, brought new strategic importance to the region.

Central Asia is currently a fertile ground for establishing strong democratic institutions and a greater U.S. influence in the region will serve to enhance our security strategy.

U.S. policy toward Central Asia should be two-fold.

First, we must address the immediate security threats posed by terrorist entities.

These security objectives can be achieved through establishing cooperative relations with the countries in the region and assisting them to advance their integration into Western political-military institutions.

Second, to achieve our long-term objective of creating an economically and politically stable Central Asia, the U.S. should work with the governments in the region toward enhancing democratic institutions and protection of human rights.

Central Asian states are currently at the crossroads and the region's leaders must make crucial decisions as to which path their countries will take.

U.S. efforts must be especially enhanced in helping Central Asia not succumb to the pressures of Islamic extremists.

However, this effort must be approached with care as not to allow the governments in the region to have a free pass to solidifying their authoritarian rule and curbing human rights.

For U.S. strategic objectives, Central Asia presents an opportunity for the U.S. to secure its interests and dissuade other parties---such as Russia and China—and threats to national security-- particularly Iran—from seeking to dominate the region.

Extremist groups such as Al-Qaeda, Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement, and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) have been involved in numerous acts of terror and have expressed anti-American sentiments.

Post 9/11, we can no longer ignore these groups and must work with the governments in the region to identify the sources of concern before they evolve into imminent threats to U.S. national security.

Despite the success of the Nunn-Lugar program, which has played a significant role in eliminating the weapons and related infrastructure in Kazakhstan inherited from the Soviet Union, there are still active research reactors, milling facilities, uranium mines, and nuclear waste dumps that remain in the region.

Many of these sites are inadequately protected from theft.

I look forward to hearing Mr. McDougal's testimony on what efforts have been taken to secure these sites and prevent these materials from entering the hands of terrorists.

Many concerns still remain about democratic progress in the region.

Uzbekistan serves as one the region's most repressive regimes, where authoritarian policies resulted in economic stagnation, human rights violations and oppression of political opposition.

The U.S. must continue to pressure President Karimov to loosen the grip on the media and political opposition, address the rampant problem of human trafficking, and allow for an international inquiry into the May 2005 Andijan massacre.

For substantial political and economic progress to occur in Central Asia, governments in the region must commit to the rule of law and protection of human rights.

Central Asia serves as a clean slate for the values of democracy and free economic trade to develop and flourish.

Moreover, advancement of U.S. influence in the region will enhance our global strategy to protect U.S. national security interests and regional priorities.

However, external pressure from Russia, China and Iran are working to counter U.S. influence in the region.

Kyrgyzstan's recent demand for the U.S. to pay a significant increase for the lease of their airbase raises a number of concerns and issues for U.S. foreign policy toward individual countries in the region, toward the region as a whole, and toward those foreign governments seeking to buy influence and exert greater control over Central Asia.

Moreover, Iran has enhanced their efforts to expand ties with Central Asian states to counterbalance U.S. political influence in the region.

Iran has invested millions in major infrastructure projects in Tajikistan, and increased trade in recent years with Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.

As such, we look forward to hearing from our witnesses today what our short and long-term strategies are to address both the internal and external factors that are undermining U.S. efforts in Central Asia.

I believe that, to achieve U.S. objectives in Central Asia, we must move away from a sometimes myopic approach, toward one that integrates military, political, and economic components of U.S. policy in the region.

We are at the precipice of a momentous opportunity in the region.

We must first help secure the region and protect it from incursions by terrorists seeking new safe-havens and more deadly unconventional weapons left over from the Cold War.

However, by helping the people of Central Asia re-shape the region into democratic, economically vibrant nations, we are addressing the conditions that breed instability and extremism.

This is in our long-term strategic security interest.

But how do we balance these short and long-term priorities? How do we reconcile our multiple objectives?

These are some of the answers we hope to answer today.

I would like to again thank our panelists for appearing before us and look forward to their testimonies.